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Maternal and paternal physical abuse: Unique and joint associations with child behavioral problems[☆]

Naixue Cui, Janet A. Deatrick, Jianghong Liu^{*}

University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, 19104, USA

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ABSTRACT

Although there is a substantial amount of literature documenting the relationship between child abuse and behavioral problems in China, there is, on the other hand, a limited number of studies on the joint and unique associations of maternal and paternal physical abuse with child behaviors within the Chinese context. The present study, using the family systems theory as the theoretical framework, aims to examine these joint and the unique associations of maternal and paternal physical abuse with externalizing and internalizing behaviors among a community sample of Chinese children. A total of 296 children (54.7% boys, mean age 12.31 \pm 0.56 years) from two-parent families participated in the study, and they reported their physical abuse experience by their mother and father in the previous year using the Chinese version of the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale. Participants, using the Youth Self Report, reported personal externalizing and internalizing behaviors, and, similarly, their mothers, using the Child Behavior Checklist, assessed children's externalizing and internalizing behaviors. Linear mixed effect models with random intercept and slope were used to examine the joint and unique associations of maternal and paternal physical abuse with child externalizing and internalizing behaviors. Results revealed that physically abused children were more likely to be simultaneously abused by both mothers and fathers. Furthermore, when compared with their non-abused counterparts, children with physical abuse that was carried out solely by mothers (externalizing behaviors: $\beta = 6.71$, 95% CI = 2.45–10.98, $p < 0.01$; internalizing behaviors: $\beta = 4.52$, 95% CI = 0.37–8.66, $p < 0.05$) or by both mothers and fathers (externalizing behaviors: $\beta = 4.52$, 95% CI = 1.80–7.24, $p < 0.001$; internalizing behaviors: $\beta = 2.98$, 95% CI = 0.34–5.61, $p < 0.05$) reported more externalizing and internalizing behaviors. Externalizing and internalizing behaviors of children who were physically abused solely by fathers did not significantly differ from those of their non-abused counterparts, which may result from the small sample size. The present findings suggest that maternal physical abuse may have a dominant and unique association with child behaviors, regardless of whether paternal physical abuse occurs within the family. Implications for future research and practice within the Chinese context regarding the subject of child behaviors and parental abuse are discussed.

1. Introduction

The relationship between child physical abuse and behavioral problems has been well documented in both western and Chinese

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^{*} Corresponding author at: Room 426 Fagin Hall, 418 Curie Blvd, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA.

E-mail address: jhliu@nursing.upenn.edu (J. Liu).

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literature (e.g., Fang et al., 2015; Gershoff, 2002; Gilbert et al., 2009; Heim et al., 2010; McCrory, De Brito, & Viding, 2012). However, from a family research perspective, limitations exist in the understanding of the relationship between physical abuse and child behaviors. Specifically, very few Chinese studies focus on paternal physical abuse and whether it interacts with maternal physical abuse in child behavioral development. This lack of research on paternal abuse and child behavioral development in the Chinese context should be addressed, considering that, similar to the finding in the western context (Nobes & Smith, 2000), children are equally likely to be physically abused by their mothers and fathers in China (Cui, Xue, Connolly, & Liu, 2016). The present study will address this limitation by using the family systems theory as the theoretical framework.

1.1. Theoretical framework

According to the family systems theory, a family is a systematic unit that is constructed by hierarchical subsystems (e.g., mother-father subsystem, parent-child subsystem, child-sibling subsystem, etc.), within which individual members (e.g., mother, father, son, daughter, etc.) of the family are connected to, dependent on, and interact with one another (Cox & Paley, 1997). Family members have different roles in the family while sharing mutuality in the manner of circular causality (Cox & Paley, 1997). Within family systems, parents affect and are affected by one other, and their interactions have spillover effects on the relationships with their children (Cabrera, Fagan, Wight, & Schadler, 2011).

1.2. Similarities and differences in mothering and fathering

The family systems theory suggests that fathers and mothers share commonalities in their parenting practices. Concordantly, researchers found moderate to strong correlation among parenting styles between fathers and mothers. For example, Simons & Conger (2007) found that approximately two-thirds of children reported the same maternal and paternal parenting styles. Furthermore, Hoeve, Dubas, Gerris, van der Laan, and Smeenk (2011) reported that maternal and paternal parenting styles were interdependent. Similarly, in a parent-child dyadic Chinese sample, Nelson, Hart, Yang, Olsen, and Jin (2006) found a moderate correlation between maternal and paternal psychological control. However, it is still unknown if such concordance exists in terms of child physical abuse by both mothers and fathers in China.

Mothers and fathers in a family unit differentiate their task of socializing a child (Yaacob, 2006), and mothering and fathering are quantitatively and qualitatively dissimilar. Quantitatively, mothers generally spend more time with children and are, therefore, more likely to engage in conflicts with children (Bornstein, 2001; Fagan et al., 2014). Qualitatively, mothering is usually regarded as authoritative, warm, and caring, whereas fathering is more authoritarian, demanding, and less responsive (Holmbeck, Paikoff, & Brooks-Gunn, 1995; Russell et al., 1998; Russell et al., 2003). Culturally, maternal and paternal roles are typically encapsulated with the traditional Chinese adage that states, “Strict father, kind mother” (Shek, 1998). Chinese fathers, in comparison to Chinese mothers, are regarded as the primary source of disciplining school-aged children (Jankowiak, 1992). Conversely, Chinese mothers are more involved in daily activities such as dressing, feeding, and caring, and they are regarded as more affectionate, protective, and less harsh (Chen, Bian, Xin, Wang, & Silbereisen, 2010; Shek, 1998). Accordingly, researchers found differences between maternal and paternal disciplinary behaviors. Fathers carried out more physical abuse than mothers did (Lansford et al., 2002), while mothers practiced more psychological aggression and minor physical punishment (Cui et al., 2016; Lansford et al., 2002; Straus & Field, 2003; Tang, 2006). Nevertheless, a considerable proportion of children reported that physical abuse was carried out by their mothers (Cui et al., 2016).

1.3. Parenting and child behaviors

Given the comparable, yet dissimilar, roles that mothers and fathers play in child-rearing, fathering and mothering may have unique, as well as joint associations with child behavioral development. Empirical evidence shows that children whose parents practiced the same parenting styles demonstrated different behavioral outcomes compared with those whose parents had dissimilar parenting styles (Braza et al., 2015; Hoeve et al., 2011). For example, Hoeve et al. (2011) found that children with two neglectful parents showed more delinquency compared with children who had a neglectful mother but a permissive/authoritarian father. In addition, similar parenting styles by both mothers and fathers have been linked to different behavioral traits. For example, Gao, Raine, Chan, Venables, and Mednick (2010) found that a lack of maternal care was significantly associated with deviant behavior among children, while a lack of paternal care was significantly associated with emotional attachment-related psychopathy. Only one locatable Chinese study attempted to differentiate paternal and maternal physical punishment and abuse, and it found that maternal physical punishment was more strongly and significantly associated with anxiety in children compared with paternal physical punishment, and neither solely maternal nor paternal physical abuse were significantly related to anxiety in children (Wang, Wang, & Liu, 2016). However, this study did not estimate the joint association of coexisting maternal and paternal physical abuse on child behaviors.

Overall, despite the collective evidence of the relationship between parenting styles and child behaviors, few Chinese studies on physical abuse and child behavioral outcomes consider the possible coexistence of maternal and paternal abuse. The only example of such a study that examined paternal and maternal abuse and child behaviors is Wang et al. (2016), which, as previously mentioned, did not extrapolate on the coexistence of parental abuse on child behaviors. Therefore, the present study aims to examine the unique and joint associations of maternal and paternal physical abuse on externalizing and internalizing behaviors among children from two-parent families.

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